

## **Lydia Moss Bradley, Changing Peoria**

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Peoria, Illinois, one of modern Illinois' largest cities was once a small farming village, struggling to exist. Somehow this city fought to grow; somehow this community began to grow. This growth was expedited by a woman named Lydia Moss Bradley. She made many philanthropic actions in order to aid the village, but greatest of these was the school she set up in Peoria, Bradley Polytechnic Institute. Through this donation, Lydia Moss Bradley made a significant impact on Peoria, Illinois; thus earning the title...“Angel of Peoria.”

Lydia Moss Bradley's contribution to Peoria was that of an institute that would subsequently improve Peoria. Bradley was, at first, planning to donate an orphanage to Peoria in memory of her many deceased children, but after her husband's death, Lydia Bradley began leaning toward the idea of educating children, rather than raising them. After this decision, she visited numerous colleges and institutes, studying how to run a university. One such college was the Parson's Horologic Institute. This institute was the first of its kind, a university that taught its students a specific trade, watch making. It was stationed in Indiana before Lydia Bradley funded its move to Peoria. The building it was moved to was on the land where Lydia Bradley's institute would later stand. Bradley, being a person always wishing to aid, then moved a watch company to work in the same building as the institute. Students were able to work along side their betters, while learning. The watch company eventually started making bicycles as well, bringing business to Peoria involving bicycle export and sales. Both establishments shared the

building happily, until the watch and bicycle company's half of the building burned to the ground in 1892. The institute remained open for another year after the bicycle company sadly burned, until it closed as well due to insufficient funding. Throughout these events Lydia Bradley was studying the institute, realizing slowly that she not only wished to teach students a profession, but also subjects like domestic economics that could be used in average life. For twelve years, Lydia Bradley was also profiting from her large share of Central Illinois farming land, readying her funds, in order to establish her institute. Her second step in her college studies was to consult the founder of the University of Chicago, William Harper, in order to plan out class schedules and financial decisions of the institute. Harper encouraged her to open as soon as possible, and also convinced her to establish a two-year college course that fed into the University of Chicago. This allowed Chicago and Peoria to have a social connection, affecting the schooling of Peorians. Lydia Bradley commenced construction, and in 1897 the Bradley Polytechnic Institute opened. On the day the institute officially opened Lydia Bradley pledged another seventeen acres of land, and promised to annually donate half of her net income of \$25,000 to the school. The education of students was set up as a high school, followed by an optional two-year college course. The school was coeducational because Lydia Bradley wanted the students to be prepared as well as they could for their real life jobs. This educational institute benefited Peoria from its opening, teaching Peorians, among others, the way to manage their lives and find their future vocation.

Rather than only teaching the people of Peoria, the Bradley Institute also has altered the city both economically and socially. When the school opened in 1897 it was an institute, but over the years the institute became a university, being renamed Bradley

University. The school now attracts numerous students to Peoria, from around the country and the world. When the establishment was originally founded, Lydia Bradley decided the land around the building should be a sight of beauty; hence, she had many trees planted and numerous roads paved with bricks. The land was then sold to those who wished to buy it, allowing homes for Peorians to be built. This allowed a larger neighborhood area in Peoria. Among these buildings, there are some now used as dorms by college students. The modern university supplies Peoria with workers for various jobs, along with classes that sometimes work for the city of Peoria as part of their education. Workers provided by Bradley University, along with unpaid ones for projects they sometimes do for the community are those that exponentially aids Peoria's work force and business. Due to the unfathomable number of people who have moved to Peoria to walk Bradley's halls, businesses have grown in the city. Establishments of services and product alike have flocked to the campus area in order to be used by the students of Bradley University. These businesses provide jobs for Peorians as well as causing Bradley University to indirectly aid Peoria. Bradley University itself is one of Peoria's main employers, with a faculty of more than 300 on average annually. Along with this, the college also directly aids Peorians through the many classes and workshops provided for children and adults. Bradley's athletic teams are considered Peoria's college team, advertising the city even more with each victory and season played by the team. Peorians now have a team to cheer for, providing Peoria loyalty and pride for its citizens.

Through her donation of her institute, Lydia Moss Bradley has made a significant impact on Peoria, Illinois; thus earning the title...“Angel of Peoria.” Though Lydia Bradley died on January 16, 1908, neither her legacy nor her calling ended in Peoria.

Through all her feats of kindness and business actions, Peoria lives on as a powerful city. Her university, once a polytechnic institute, still stands, teaching those of Peoria and others who will change the world and Peoria. The city is now a center of business and popular residence due to Bradley University. With all these accomplishments and congratulated efforts under Lydia Bradley's doing, it is true that the "Angel of Peoria" could be satisfied in regard to her life's work. [From Bradley University, "Bradley University," <<http://www.bradley.edu/about/facts.shtml>>. (Oct. 2, 2008); "Leaves Estate of \$2,800,000," *Herald Tribune* (Summer 1907), C3; Nancy Ridgeway, "Centennial Series: Lydia Moss Bradley: Businesswoman With a Cause," *Bradley University Hilltopics* (1996) 1; Nancy Ridgeway, "Centennial Series: Lydia Moss Bradley: Making Dreams Come True," *Bradley University Hilltopics*, (Winter 1997) 2; Nancy Ridgeway, "Centennial Series: Lydia Moss Bradley: Philanthropist," *Bradley University Hilltopics*, (1997) 3; Allen A. Upton, *Forgotten Angel*; and Louis A. R. Yates, Speech, Jun. 18, 1980.]